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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001723

SIPDIS

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y -- PARA MARKINGS CORRECTED

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA FRONT OFFICE AND NEA/ELA; NSC FOR
ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/YERGER

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [KDEM](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: ARMY COMMANDER, HIS PRESIDENTIAL
PROSPECTS DIMMING, MORE FORWARD-LEANING ON PRESERVING
STABILITY

REF: A. STATE 148539

[1](#)B. BEIRUT 1641

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Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

[1](#)1. (S) In a one-on-one meeting with the Ambassador on 10/30, Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman said that the LAF would try to "freeze" the situation on the ground, taking action against whichever side of Lebanon's cavernous political divide -- March 8-Aoun or March 14 -- would try to change the status quo by force. This change in thinking (from the more passive neutrality he advocated earlier) stemmed, he acknowledged, from recognition that the LAF would split apart if ordered to stay in the barracks in case violence erupted. Sleiman reacted favorably to the message (ref A) about what steps the USG would take in case of a second cabinet or extension of Emile Lahoud's presidential term. Sleiman expressed exasperation at the glowing terms used by Hizballah and other pro-Syrians in describing him. Claiming that Damascus itself is divided in its opinion of him, he mused that Hizballah's praise is designed to destroy, not promote, his potential as a presidential candidate. What Hizballah really wants, he insisted, is an indefinite extension of the status quo.

[1](#)2. (S) We believe that Sleiman's more constructive approach to the army's role in preventing or responding to violence stems from at least three factors. First, Defense Minister Murr told us that he has worked on Sleiman. Second, Walid Jumblatt made it clear that, should Sleiman order the LAF to its barracks in the case of March 8-provoked violence, Druse officers and soldiers will break away, ruling out passivity as a real option if Sleiman wants to preserve LAF unity. Third, Sleiman hinted that his presidential prospects were dimming. He thus may be focused more on securing his legacy as commander (in hopes of later parlaying that into a political role) rather than on the possibility of becoming president now. Indeed, later in the week, the LAF issued a communique denying that Sleiman is a candidate. While

Sleiman's stated position of the LAF's response to violence is an improvement over what he told us only 12 days earlier (ref b), March 14 and GOL leaders still hope Sleiman will go further, in deploying the army as a preventive measure in the coming days. End summary and comment.

SLEIMAN'S THINKING HAS EVOLVED;
LAF TO BE LESS PASSIVE, HE SAYS

¶3. (SBU) On 10/30, the Ambassador met with LAF Commander Michel Sleiman one-on-one to go over ref A's message about what steps the USG is likely to take in terms of financial and travel sanctions, should Emile Lahoud stay in Baabda Palace beyond his term's midnight 11/23 expiration or should there be a second, illegal cabinet appointed. The LAF, the Ambassador underscored, must remain solidly on the side of legitimacy.

¶4. (S) Noting that the USG message was "clear" and "very good," Sleiman concurred. He noted that his own thinking had evolved since the 10/18 dinner he hosted with the Ambassador (ref B). He no longer advocated ordering the LAF to retreat to the barracks in case of street violence that might potentially split the LAF. The very act of staying in the barracks might split the LAF even more quickly than taking action, he said. Instead, he wanted the LAF to "freeze" (a word he used several times) the situation on the ground. No matter how "hot" the political language between March 8-Aoun and March 14, the security status quo must remain "frozen." The LAF would remain politically neutral, acting against whichever side tried to upset the security situation. Sleiman expressed hope that, by spreading word that the LAF will not be passive and will act against anyone, no matter what the political allegiance, who commits violence, the LAF will deter violence rather than have to act against it. When asked specifically if the LAF would protect the Grand Serail (seat of the cabinet) against March 8-Aoun attack, Sleiman gave an unequivocal yes.

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SLEIMAN SUSPECTS HIZBALLAH
WANTS TO BURN HIS CANDIDACY

¶5. (S) The Ambassador raised Sleiman's presidential prospects, noting that Hizballah, Nabih Berri, and other pro-Syrians continued to talk as though Sleiman was the only possible contender. While noting that no Lebanese president could survive by being unrelentingly hostile to Syria, Sleiman expressed what sounded to be sincere exasperation. He insisted he is not campaigning for the presidency. By continuing to praise him, Hizballah must be intentionally trying to burn him. "Of course" people will be suspicious of his loyalties, if all of Syria's allies in Lebanon focus only on him. Lebanon must have good relations with Syria, but based on mutual respect and not dependent on tolerating Hizballah's arms indefinitely.

¶6. (S) Asked by the Ambassador why Hizballah would be trying to burn him, Sleiman said that he mused it was to eliminate a potential compromise, unifying figure. He calculated that Hizballah's real goal is to extend the status quo indefinitely, in order to prevent any potential deal regarding its weapons, especially in advance of any U.S. deal with or fight against Iran. The Syrians themselves, Sleiman claimed, have a divided view of him. While Bashar al-Asad probably "likes" him, Rustom Ghazaleh and Syrian Military Intelligence detest him. "Khalasz (enough), forget it," Sleiman said, waving his hand to cut off further discussion of the presidential race. (Later in the week, the LAF issued a communique stating that the commander is not a candidate and does not, per the constitution, even qualify to be a candidate.)

ADVOCATING A SHIFT IN MURR
FROM DEFENSE TO INTERIOR

17. (S) The Ambassador asked Sleiman one last question regarding the presidency: whether he or someone else became president, whom would he advise the prime minister-designate appoint as Minister of Defense? Would he support Elias Murr remaining in that position under the new cabinet? Sleiman acknowledged that Murr had contributed to the positive development in the LAF's relationship with the U.S. But, he said, he would recommend that Murr return to the Minister of Interior slot he had under Rafiq Hariri's 2000-2004 cabinet. The Minister of Defense position, Sleiman explained, isn't actually very important, especially if there is a good relationship between the president, prime minister, and commander. But the Minister of Interior has direct control over the Internal Security Forces (ISF, national police) and Surete General. Now, with a Sunni (Hassan Saba') serving as Minister of Interior over the ISF which is also commanded by a Sunni (Ashraf Rifi), it is "too easy" to claim that the ISF is turning into a Sunni militia. If Murr were Minister of Interior, such allegations would be easily dismissed. Also, Surete General, headed by a Shia (Wafiq Jezzini), has too many links with Hizballah. As a foe of Hizballah, Murr would reduce the linkages.

COMMENT

18. (S) In the time since the commander hosted the Ambassador to an extended dinner on 10/18 (ref B), Sleiman's thinking seems to have evolved in two significant areas. First, from riding high as the presumed front-runner president-in-waiting, Sleiman now seems to grasp that his prospects (at least for now) have seriously dimmed. We attribute the precipitous plummeting of his chances (or, more accurately, the perception of his chances) to the categorical, unyielding refusal of PM Siniora, Walid Jumblatt, Samir Geagea and others to contemplate amending the constitution. Whatever the sincerity of its sentiments, the LAF's communique that Sleiman is not a candidate reflects the reality of how his odds are viewed today compare to two weeks ago. But we wouldn't cross Sleiman's name off the prospective presidential list quite yet. He could yet again, and easily, pop up as the candidate to beat, especially in

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case violence breaks out.

19. (S) The second area where Sleiman's thinking has evolved since 10/18 is related to the LAF's response should violence break out. Two weeks ago, Sleiman vowed to protect public institutions but to keep the LAF away from any street fighting. Now, he states that the LAF must "freeze" the situation on the ground. We believe that this positive evolution stems from three factors. First, Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Elias Murr has, we understand, been quietly working on Sleiman to convince him that the LAF's duty is to take action measures to preserve stability. Second, Walid Jumblatt has publicly stated that, were the army to retreat to the barracks in the face of March 8-Aoun aggression, the Druze officers and soldiers would break away in order to protect the Druze population from attack. This means that Sleiman can no longer pretend that passivity preserves LAF unity. Third, Sleiman's apparent recognition that he is less likely to achieve the presidency today may have focused him again on his legacy as a commander. He has stated to us before that he wants to become involved in civilian politics, an ambition that arguably becomes harder to achieve if the LAF splits in his last weeks as commander.

110. (S) Walid Jumblatt, meeting with the Ambassador on 11/3, reported that LAF Chief of Staff Shawki Masri (the LAF's second-ranking officer and someone close to Jumblatt) told him that, indeed, the LAF is now looking more carefully at

how to respond aggressively to stop any street violence. In Jumblatt's view, this is a positive development but not yet good enough: Jumblatt hopes that the LAF will deploy soon in visible numbers in Beirut, to deter any violence before it occurs. We know that PM Siniora agrees. While recognizing how over-stretched the LAF already is, we plan to raise this with Murr, in hopes that he, too, will push the LAF in this direction. Preventing violence rather than being forced to stop violence should, in our view, be the goal, and one that is consistent with Sleiman's focus on preserving LAF unity.

FELTMAN